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THE CARE OF THE HELPLESS

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MUCH has been said about a nurse's responsibilities as regards her legal obligations, and her duty to the public, to charitable organizations, to other nurses, to the physician, to her patients in general, and to their family and friends; but I wish to speak in this paper of her duty to a certain class of patients, a class where her responsibilities are greatly increased because of the very nature of their afflictions.

The word "helpless" appeals to every one of us as perhaps does no other word in the English language, and when applied to patients, it should appeal with greater force to nurses than to any one else, for no one so fully understands its meaning as they.

There is no nurse worthy the name who would not turn in horror from the thought of neglecting a baby, and yet, possibly, there are some who do not realize that the same loving care and thoughtful attention given to one of these little ones should be given to a helpless or delirious patient; yes, it requires even greater care and thought on the part of the nurse.

I call to mind an incident of a patient, a farmer's wife, who was afflicted with melancholia attonita, being brought to a county institution. She had been in that condition for three years, and had not spoken a word during that time, having had to be fed and cared for as a helpless child. The woman was a pitiful sight, sitting in her chair all day, her head falling forward on her chest; for the muscles of the neck having been in that position so long, it was impossible to bring the head to an upright position. The mouth was hanging open and the saliva dropping on her gown. A repulsive sight, you will say, and so it was. Yet the kindly woman under whose care she was placed saw possibilities there. The dull, faded gown was replaced by a bright, attractive one, and flowers freshly picked were placed in her lap or pinned to her gown. She was always given the same bright, cheery "Good morning" as were the other patients. The food was prepared nicely and served in an attractive style, the nurse talking in an easy, pleasant manner of things which would interest a farmer's wife, and trying to induce the patient to help herself. I will go no more into detail; suffice it to say that after months of patient, kindly attention the nurse was rewarded by being greeted one morning with a smile, later on by queer sounds which, after patient labor, became well articulated words. So, after months of such

care, this patient was able to talk, to walk about, to care for herself, and became a useful member of that little community known as the "county poor farm."

We will not often meet with such extreme cases, but I give it here, hoping some one will be helped as I was by this lesson of thoughtful, unselfish care given this unfortunate one.

Just as a baby will feel and know the difference in a fussy, nervous nurse who think babies a "nuisance," and one who handles them gently and lovingly, so a delirious patient will be soothed and comforted by a nurse with a quiet, easy manner.

There are an infinite number of little things a nurse must think of and do that would be asked for by a rational patient. All these little unnamed attentions add greatly to their comfort and their possible recovery. Though they are never able to thank us,

"These little things take little wings
And find their way to heaven."

With no other class of patients must a nurse so fully put herself in their places and think for them.

It is a source of great pleasure to care for patients who appreciate our every effort, and who tell us of the comfort we have been to them; it helps to lighten the burdens which are so heavy at times; and yet the true nurse will be none the less attentive to her patient though she realizes that all her work will go unnoticed and no words of cheer will come to her.

I wonder if with these helpless ones we are just as particular in every detail as though they were fully conscious. Is the room tidy, are the flowers fresh, is the bed free from wrinkles, are the eyes protected from the light, is the body perfectly clean and in a comfortable position, is the food tasty and served daintily, are our voices always pleasant and our manner gentle?

Even though the body is helpless, the intellect dull or obscure, and our work seemingly in vain, our interest must never flag, nor our thoughtful, kindly endeavor to heal cease. For "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Intelligence and Courtesy not always are combined;
Often in a wooden house a golden room we find.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.